

NORTHWESTnews

Suppose your lover were to die suddenly from a heart attack or in an automobile accident or another catastrophic event. Maybe death wouldn't be the result, but a sudden change in health would remove all rights to decision making from your hands.

What if the house you lived in together were taken over by your spouse's parents and you were told to leave? What if you never were allowed to see your children again?

Nobody likes to think about these possibilities. As a result, people frequently don't take the precautions necessary to protect the continuity of their families from being further disrupted by outside sources.

Many folks know someone who has been disenfranchised because of a lack of legal protection. Even though sexual minority families are more prevalent and more accepted than in the past, local and national anti-gay groups are working constantly to deny basic legal recognition to them.

The number and variety of legal documents needed by any family to live a normal life in our culture is phenomenal. Birth, marriage, divorce and death all require paperwork, but these records only form the tip of the iceberg.

Mental health issues can require extensive documentation just to get one's partner the help he or she needs. And the number of gay and lesbian households with foster or adopted children is increasing.

The paper trail required in today's litigious culture is astounding even for heterosexuals. For sexual minority families, it's beyond unbelievable.

Concerned about these and other issues, several organizations decided to do something about it. Members of the Dads Group, Love Makes a Family and the Oregon Gay and Lesbian Law

THE PAPER CHASE

Conference educates same-sex families about the documents they need

by Patricia L. MacAodha



Conference planners brainstorm ideas during a meeting Sept. 4

Association have been meeting to put together the first Sustainable Family Conference.

Their goal is to educate members of the sexual minorities community about how to protect themselves and their relationships through greater awareness of what legal traps can threaten a family's security. The conference will feature attorneys to assist with legal needs as well as financial planning professionals to help give rights to partners in case one dies or the relationship ends.

Coordinating it all is Portlander edd samuelson, who began a support group in 1990 for about 40 gay men, ages 26 to 70, with children between 1 and 33 years old. The organization affiliated with Cascade AIDS Project two years

later and most recently joined forces with Love Makes a Family. He always has been concerned about the legal rights and responsibilities of gay and lesbian parents and was surprised that "most of the people we knew didn't know what to do" regarding documentation.

There are many ways heterosexual couples can acquire legal rights unavailable to sexual minorities. Even with domestic partnership coverage, there are no guarantees that a same-sex relationship is protected from homophobic precedents buried in state, county and even city regulations.

What happens, for instance, when a couple part company? How do they divide property, pets and children? The situation may be further

complicated by domestic violence, requiring a restraining order, or by a mortgaged house on which both have been paying.

Planning team member Mike Whitcomb has thought out the various problems he and his partner have not yet solved. Both are fathers of older children, the youngest being 18, so legal custody is not an issue for them. But "we have no will, trust or any other documentation to ensure that what I have acquired in life so far goes to the intended people should I pass away."

Another horror story, samuelson recalls, is that of Marlene Boone and Melissa Mills, a couple who *Just Out* reported on earlier this year. When Boone was hospitalized, her mother came into the picture, drove Mills out of her own home and forbade her from visiting her comatose partner.

The couple did reconnect, but not until both had suffered painfully from an intrusion that heterosexual families would not likely have to endure. This is not unusual for same-sex families and is the main reason why planners are anxious to spread the word about the conference.

The organizers, aware of financial hardships, are charging \$5 to \$20 for adults, and kids are free. Child care will be available, and samuelson promises good networking possibilities. Vendor opportunities will be available, and sponsorship from additional organizations and individuals is still welcome. **JM**

The SUSTAINABLE FAMILY CONFERENCE will be held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sept. 28 at First Congregational Church, 1126 S.W. Park Ave. For more information call 503-228-3892 or e-mail edd@lmfamily.org.

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